

Harris plans to stop pot at source

*Teams to seek out
marijuana fields*

By Celia W. Dugger

Staff Writer

More than 200 state employees this spring will be swooping over Georgia in helicopters and planes, hiking into remote wooded areas, and harvesting for destruction one of the state's most lucrative cash crops — marijuana — in a new, coordinated war on drugs, Gov. Joe Frank Harris announced Wednesday.

Flanked by officials from six state agencies, Harris said at his weekly press conference that the Georgia Bureau of Investigation for the first time will enlist and organize the resources of other state departments to combat marijuana growing.

The governor held up the logo of the new Governor's Special Strike Force on Drug Suppression, which depicts a bright green marijuana leaf with a helicopter superimposed on it, the propeller tearing through the plant. The logo will adorn the uniforms of participating employees.

Last year, state and local officials uprooted more than 660,000 marijuana plants with a street value of more than \$291 million, and arrested 149 people in connection with the seizures, GBI director Phil Peters

See MARIJUANA, Page 21-A

Marijuana

Continued From Page 1-A

said.

More plants were confiscated in Georgia than in any other state in the nation, according to figures from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration.

Peters said those numbers should increase with the state's intensified efforts. "This is the only drug that we have the real ability to stop at the source," he said.

In the next few weeks, as the growing season gets under way, a minimum of 10 people will be in the field each day searching for marijuana, and as many as 40 may be involved on days when officials find a large crop.

He estimated that more than 200 employees will be involved in the course of the year.

"They'll be out and about the state for the next eight or nine months," he said.

Six agencies will take part in the strike force: the GBI, the departments of Natural Resources, Defense, Transportation and Public Safety; and the Georgia Forestry Commission.

Pilots in different agencies have been trained in techniques for spotting marijuana from the air, and state employees who work in the woods have been given tips on what to look for on the ground, Peters said.

When marijuana is discovered, state tractors, mowers and trucks will be used to cut the crop down and cart it away.

Peters said there are no plans to spray the herbicide paraquat as a way of killing the plants. "We're going to do it the old-fashioned way — by hand," he said.

Harris, who drew fire from North Georgia residents when he approved the spraying of paraquat by federal agents last year, said he would not rule out paraquat, but he added that its use "is not under consideration."

The state has not set aside new funds for the strike force. The fuel, equipment and manpower costs will be absorbed by the participating agencies.

"We're taking this out of our hide," Peters said. The federal government will contribute about \$260,000 to the program.